DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 344 817 SO 021 889

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TITLE The Civic Culture of the United States and Its Challenges to Civic Educators.
PUB DATE 91
NOTE 23p.; Paper presented at an international conference on "Western Democracy and Eastern Europe" (Berlin, Germany, October 13-18, 1991).
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Citizen Participation; *Citizenship Education; Citizenship Responsibility; *Civics; *Constitutional History; Constitutional Law; *Democratic Values; Elementary Secondary Education; Multicultural Education; Political Attitudes; Political Issues; Political Science; Student Attitudes; *United States History
IDENTIFIERS *United States Constitution

ABSTRACT

The core civic ideas that helped form a consensus around a United States Constitution in 1787 are the seeds that produce the civic culture of the United States today. Constitutionalism, republicanism, communitarianism, and classical liberalism were related ideas at the center of U.S. civic culture in the 1780s. Two hundred years later, with some modifications, these ideas continue to be the fundamentals of the contemporary civic culture in the United States. In general, people in the United States remain committed to the civic culture embodied by these principles. However, there are serious deficiencies, such as persistent intolerance of unpopular minorities, great indifference to responsibilities of participation for the common good, gross ignorance of constitutional principles combined with thoughtless reverence for the "American Creed," and finally, a declining interest in and sense of concern for the commonwealth, the national, and local communities that citizens share as members of a civil society. In order to contend with these deficiencies, civic education should be emphasized in all nationwide programs for improvement of teaching and learning in elementary and secondary schools. A number of recommendations in this regard are made, including the establishment of national standards for the teaching and learning of civics, which emphasize the origins and development of core ideas of the civic culture. Current efforts by some educators, made in the name of multicultural education, to separate and promote ethnic and racial group identities, place in jeopardy a common U.S. identity based on core civic ideas. A list of references is included. (DB)

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THE CIVIC CULTURE OF THE UNITED STATES AND ITS CHALLENGES TO CIVIC EDUCATORS

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This paper was prepared for an International Conference on "Western Democracy and Eastern Europe," Berlin, Federal Republic of Germany, October 13-18, 1991.

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In the autumn of 1787, Americans faced a profound political decision: whether or not to accept an untested but promising frame of government. This was a critical moment in the nascent civic culture of a fledgling republic, the thirteen United States of America. The great constitutional debate of 1787 was often hot, as the rival parties contended for advantages and victories. However, both proponents and opponents of the Constitution of 1787 agreed upon certain fundamental ideas, which reduced their dispute to a manageable conflict within consensus, instead of an ultimate polemical war between partisans of unbridgeable viewpoints.

The core civic ideas of the American consensus of 1787 were the seeds that produced the civic culture of the United States today. And the alternative positions of the rival parties of the founding debate--the Federalists and Antifederalists--became the roots and branches of today's differences about the meaning and applications of core civic ideas, which developed from the seedbed of our founding period.

Since the 1780s, the civic culture of the United States has consisted of ideas about desirable relationships between citizens and their state; their rights, privileges, and duties within a frame of government, the Constitution of 1787 and its amendments. What are the core ideas of the American civic

culture? How do Americans today respond to the core civic ideas? What educational challenges are posed by the civic culture, its root ideas, patterns of public attitudes and behaviors, and enduring issues?

The Core Civic Ideas

Constitutionalism, republicanism, communitarianism, and liberalism were related ideas at the center of the American civic culture of the 1780s. Two hundred years later, with some modifications, these ideas continue to be fundamentals of the contemporary civic culture in the United States. The operations of our American polity, the patterns of public attitudes and behaviors, and the critical issues of the commonwealth can all be connected to and illuminated by this set of four core ideas.

The primary idea, constitutionalism, means limited government and the rule of law embodied in a frame of government (constitution) that reigns supreme in the affairs of citizens and their governors. All members of the civil society are expected to act in accordance with the "Supreme Law of the Land," which provides commonly accepted terms for addressing public issues and maintaining order and stability within the commonwealth.

Republicanism, the second core idea, refers to constitutional government by representatives of the people, who are directly or indirectly accountable to their constituents. In the United States of the 1780s, and thereafter, constitutional republicanism has also meant popular sovereignty,

government by consent of the governed, the people. Today, we tend to refer to this conception of popular government as a representative constitutional democracy, rather than as republicanism.

The third core idea of the civic culture is communitarianism, which involves commitment to the public good, the commonwealth, and civic virtue by the citizenry. The public duties and responsibilities of active citizenship, exercised virtuously on behalf of the community, are supposed to enable the constitutional government to express the will of the majority of the people, or at least a sizeable plurality of them.

Liberalism, the fourth core idea in this set, is used here in its classic sense, as a label for personal and political liberty. In the American civic culture of the 1780s, and afterward, the ultimate purpose of a constitutional republican government (or a constitutional democracy) was to secure the private rights and liberties of individuals in the community or commonwealth. Thus, security for the private rights of individuals was equated with the public good.

These four core ideas are embedded in the founding documents of the United States of America: The Declaration of Independence, the Constitution of 1787, The Federalist Papers, and the Bill of Rights. They constitute the essential elements of an American creed, the civic culture that connects the diverse persons and groups of a pluralistic society formed by a polyglot people that can trace its ancestors to virtually every habitable part of the globe. To

be an American, then, has been to acquire, to believe in, and to act on these core civic ideas.

Gunnar Myrdal, the astute Swedish observer of political life in the United States, perceived the vitality and utility of the core civic ideas that have defined the American identity (1944, p. 4): "Americans of all national origins, classes, regions, creeds, and colors, have something in common: a social ethos, a political creed. It is difficult to avoid the judgment that this "American Creed" is the cement in the structure of this great and disparate nation."

This American identity, of course, was an invention of the founding period. An eminent historian, Edmund Morgan (1977, p. 100) points out: "Nationalism has been the great begetter of revolutions. . . . In our case it was the other way round: We [Americans] struck for independence and were thereby stirred into nationality; our nation was the child, not the father, of our revolution."

James Madison and other framers of the Constitution nurtured this "child"--American nationalism--by basing their frame of government on a sovereign American people, which Professor Morgan says (1988, p. 267) was "a popular sovereignty not hitherto fully recognized. . . . Madison was inventing a sovereign American people to overcome the sovereign states. . . . To create a national [republican] government resting on the whole people of the nation" was the Federalists response to the critical threat of unbridled

diversity and disunity that jeopardized the nascent United States of America.

Most Americans today continue to invoke the traditional Federalist solution to the perennial problem of sustaining a national community in a pluralistic society with a strong commitment to public exercise of personal rights and liberties. The core ideas that constitute the traditional civic culture are still vital forces in the lives of citizens; but today, as in the past, they stimulate perplexing and potentially disruptive issues. How do the people of our contemporary United States respond to the traditional civic ideas? What are the current patterns of attitudes and behaviors about the so-called "American Creed?" What are the key issues and variations on the patterns of the civic culture?

The Public Responses to the Core Ideas

In general, people in the United States have kept their "constitutional faith"--a term that the legal scholar Sanford Levinson uses to refer to the common civic culture (1988, pp. 3-8). Michael Kammen, the prize-winning historian, has documented the enduring faith and pride in the Constitution expressed persistently by most Americans across more than 200 years of their national history (1986, pp. 3-42).

Kammen's conclusion is corroborated by recent surveys of American public opinion. In 1987 (New York Times poll), 70% of a representative national sample of Americans responded that the Constitution "has done a

good job of making Americans think of themselves as part of one nation." Most of the respondents in a Gallup Poll (1986, p. 32) expressed satisfaction with "the way democracy is working" in the United States. Another national opinion survey (Janda, et al., 1989, p. 22) revealed the strong belief of Americans in freedom as a core civic value.

It is clear that a large majority of Americans have readily expressed positive attitudes and beliefs about the core ideas of their civic culture, when these ideas have been presented to them only as abstractions (Kammen, 1986; Patrick, 1977; Patrick and Hoge, 1991; Sullivan et al., 1982). However, these general positive orientations of survey respondents tend to be vacuous. Sizeable proportions of the respondents have also revealed gross ignorance and misconceptions about the meaning and applications of the core principles of their constitutional democracy, which they purport to strongly support. In his sweeping study of "the Constitution in American culture" Kammen observed that Americans have tended to reveal a "curious blend of reverence and ignorance" about constitutionalism (1986, p. 5).

The Hearst Report (1987) documented the public's ignorance of key facets of their Constitution. And two recent reports of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (1991a and 1991b) have indicated an alarming lack of knowledge about constitutional history and principles of government among about 40% of a national sample of 12th-grade students. The two NAEP reports on student achievement in history and civics also

revealed that nearly half of the respondents lacked familiarity with the founding documents of our nation--the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution of 1787, the Bill of Rights, and The Federalist Papers--which incorporate the core ideas of the civic culture.

Numerous studies of public attitudes and beliefs have demonstrated another disturbing pattern of responses to core ideas of the civic culture: reluctance or refusal to extend constitutional rights and liberties to certain unpopular individuals or minority groups (Erikson, et al., 1988; Patrick, 1977; Patrick and Hoge; Sullivan et al., 1982). This tendency toward civic intolerance is more diffuse today than it was in the 1950s and 1960s. For example, communists, atheists, and militant advocates of black power were common targets of civically intolerant Americans at mid-century, when more than half of the respondents of representative national samples would have denied basic constitutional rights and liberties to members of these unpopular groups. By contrast, illiberal respondents of the 1980s no longer generally agreed upon the groups or types of individuals that they would deprive of their constitutional rights to liberty.

It seems, however, that almost everybody today is willing to deny constitutional liberties and rights to somebody. Only 12 percent of the respondents in a 1987 Gallup Poll said "they would be tolerant of any type of group as a neighbor." Another national survey permitted respondents to identify the political group they disliked most. Next, they were asked whether

or not members of this "most disliked group" should be permitted to freely express or teach their opinions. No particular group emerged as a common target of civic intolerance. Rather, there was a diversity of targets identified by a large majority of the respondents who would deny civil liberties and rights to members of these "least-liked groups"--whatever the groups might be. For example, only 19 percent would permit a member of their "least-liked group" to teach in the public schools. And, only 34 percent would permit members of their "least-liked group" to hold a public rally in their city. "Pluralistic intolerance" is the label given to this new finding about civic illiberalism in our contemporary American society (Erikson et al., 1988, pp. 103-107; Sullivan et al., 1982).

Persistent findings about civic intolerance reveal widespread public misunderstanding of constitutionalism and its relationship to the personal and political liberties of individuals. It appears that many Americans neither recognize nor comprehend that the Constitution sets legitimate limits upon the power of the majority, acting through its representatives in government, to oppress individuals and minority groups, especially those who express unpopular views.

Another persistent and disturbing pattern of public response to the core civic ideas is low levels of citizen participation in the political systems and communities of the United States. In Habits of the Heart (1985) and The Good Society (1991), Robert Bellah and his colleagues have bemoaned

steadily declining levels of responsible participation in the civic life of the United States, and the subsequent debilitation of the communitarian ideals of social responsibility and civic virtue.

Surveys of civic attitudes and behaviors have substantiated the lamentations of Bellah and others, who are concerned about the participatory dimension of the civic culture that is supposed to undergird representative democracy for the common good. The surveys reveal that secondary school students acknowledge the importance of voting and otherwise participating in electoral politics, but they also tend to express low levels of political interest and efficacy (Hart, 1989; Miller, 1985). Furthermore, the percentage of 18- to 24-year olds voting in public elections lags far behind the rate for those over age 25, which also tends to be much lower than desired by advocates of active and responsible citizenship (Flanigan and Zingale, 1991).

In a recent nation-wide survey of American youth, Hart (1989) found a massive disinterest in community service and disdain for the common good. These young Americans expressed great pride in their civic heritage of personal and political liberty. But, they failed to understand the relationships of civic and social responsibilities to the preservation and enjoyment of their precious freedoms.

Declining levels of political trust among younger and older Americans have also been noted with dismay by Bellah (1991), Hart (1989), Sussman (1988) and others concerned about the decline in social responsibility for the

common good that afflicts communities throughout the United States. Surveys of representative national samples during the 1980s showed that almost 60% of the respondents were distrustful of the actions and pronouncements of their government officials (Sussman, 1988, p. 69). Thus, Alan Abramowitz (1989, p. 190) concluded that a majority of Americans "had become disillusioned with the political process." However, Abramowitz has argued persuasively that the foundations of the civic culture have not been impaired by declining levels of trust, because the "discontent is focused on specific policies or incumbent authorities rather than on the regime or political community. . . . The public's attachment to the political community [the civic culture] and the regime remained strong" (1989, p. 203).

Political conflict continues to be conducted within the consensus of the commonly accepted civic culture. Most Americans today, as in the past, do not profoundly oppose or express alienation from the core ideas that constitute the civic culture rooted in the founding period, 200 years ago. Rather, they continue to use the standards of the "American Creed" to gauge the health and vitality of their commonwealth. And most Americans continue to appeal to their core civic ideas for redress of political grievances, which are often presented as unjustifiable gaps between the ideals and realities of civic life. Finally, most citizens of the United States continue to express their national identity in terms of their allegiance to the common civic culture.

The Educational Challenges

This brief synthesis of public response to the core ideas of the civic culture is both reassuring and problematical. The quantitative and qualitative evidence indicate continuity, stability, and considerable commitment to the civic culture. But there are obvious deficiencies, such as persistent intolerance of unpopular minorities, massive indifference to responsibilities of participation for the common good, gross ignorance of constitutional principles combined with thoughtless reverence for the "American Creed," and finally, a declining interest in and sense of concern for the commonwealth, the national and local communities that we share as members of a civil society.

These deficient public responses to the core civic ideas have not grown so large as to critically threaten the 200-year-old civic culture. The civic deficiencies, however, could become magnified, if they are neglected by today's educational reformers. This neglect could eventually put the civic culture at risk. Thus, civic education should be emphasized in all nationwide programs for improvement of teaching and learning in elementary and secondary schools.

These recommendations, at least, should be followed:

(1) Establish national standards for the teaching and learning of civics, which emphasize the origins and development of core ideas of the civic culture.

(2) Maintain a national testing program to measure achievement in

civics in terms of the national standards.

(3) Identify civics as a core subject of the school curriculum in elementary and secondary schools, which should be studied by all students.

(4) Include a prominent civic dimension in the teaching and learning of American history and world history; a major unifying theme of the United States history course, for example, should be the story of constitutional democracy--its origins, issues, successes, failures, and prospects.

(5) Emphasize teaching and learning of the core ideas of the civic culture in history and civics courses; require students to investigate enduring issues about the meaning, uses, applications, and consequences of the core civic ideas in our history and contemporary society.

(6) Establish and maintain a nationwide program for the continuing education of civics teachers, so that they are regularly exposed to the best scholarship, materials, and methods in teaching and learning about the core ideas, institutions, and issues of our civic culture in our history and contemporary society.

Unless we civic educators nurture our civic culture through sound educational programs, the civic deficiencies noted in this paper will grow to threaten the "American Creed" that has defined and sustained the national

community of the United States. Unless our students are emphatically and dramatically taught the ideas, issues, and alternative views of the American civic tradition, they will neither know it nor appreciate it. And, in the absence of systematic education about their civic culture, citizens cannot be expected to think critically about its core ideas, in order to maintain, modify, and improve upon them.

Postscript: The Challenge of the Ethnocentric Pluralists

The current divisive public debate about multicultural education in the United States provides a final compelling reason for renewed emphasis on the civic culture in civic education. Some parties to this controversy about the school curriculum appear to reject the very idea of a common culture in the United States, especially a common civic culture.

In the name of multiculturalism, some educational reformers promote a utopian vision of society that is ethnocentric and particularistic. I call it ethnocentric pluralism, because it exalts ethnic and racial group identities and denigrates a common American identity based on civic ideas in our founding documents, which can be shared by various individuals of diverse ancestries, religions, and races.

In the name of multicultural education, today's advocates of ethnocentric pluralism reject core content and common learning for all students. Instead they would have separate curricula in history and social

studies that are custom-made for each particular ethnic-racial group in the society. Unlike most factions in United States history, today's purveyors of an ethnocentric pluralism appear to reject the long-standing pattern of conflict within consensus. Instead of using the "American Creed" as a set of standards for the redress of grievances, they seem to seek solutions to their civic problems in a counter-culture.

What if public education programs were reconstructed to accommodate or encourage the aspirations of these ethnocentric pluralists? Well, the cosmopolitan vision of our far-seeing founders--an extended constitutional republic based on a new popular sovereignty of national scope--could be repudiated and replaced by a diverse parochial society of separated ethnic and racial groups. Thus, our common civic culture, the core civic ideas that bind our pluralistic civil society, would be at risk. So would realistic and accurate portrayals of history and our contemporary civic life.

The eminent historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr. (1991, p. 2) fears that "the contemporary ideal is shifting from assimilation [to the common civic culture] to ethnicity, from integration to separatism." In his trenchant commentary on the new ethnic-racial separatist movement, The Disuniting of America, Professor Schlesinger (p. 64) warns that our common civic culture--the historic ties that bind our pluralistic national community--may be at risk: "The ethnic ideology inculcates the illusion that membership in one or another ethnic group is the basic American experience. . . . And when a vocal and

visible minority pledges primary allegiance to their groups, whether ethnic, sexual, religious . . . it presents a threat to the brittle bonds of national unity that hold this diverse and fractious society together."

Schlesinger concludes his book with an ultimate challenge to civic educators (pp. 82-83): "Our task," he says, "is to combine due appreciation of the splendid diversity of the nation with due emphasis on the great unifying Western ideas of individual freedom, political democracy, and human rights. These are the ideas that define the America nationality. . . ."

How, then, can we civic educators and citizens of the United States address the quintessential American paradox of unity in diversity, which is at the center of Professor Schlesinger's challenge?

An adequate response must emphasize teaching and learning about the realities of cultural diversity within an all-inclusive common history of the United States. By contrast with the ethnocentric pluralists, this would be a cosmopolitan multicultural education that portrays the ideals and ordeals associated with the national motto, E Pluribus Unum. The struggles, failures, and successes of numerous and various efforts to achieve the elusive ideal, diversity and unity within a national community, would be stressed throughout this history and civics curriculum. Thus, we would seek to provide a more accurate multicultural history of our pluralistic national community, as it has evolved from its colonial origins to the present. Of course, the relationships of America with other world regions and the histories of other civilizations must

be part of an authentic multicultural education.

In the civic education and civic life of the United States, we must also seek an authentic expansion of the circle of committed citizens connotated by the opening phrase in our Constitution, "We the People. . . ." The diverse individuals and groups who are disaffected or alienated must somehow be brought within this circle of the civic culture. To achieve this outcome will require increasing levels of civic tolerance for diverse individuals and groups. It will also necessitate a much greater concern on the part of most persons for the common good in concert with the good of diverse individuals and groups. Bellah and associates say it well (1991, p. 9): "As we understand it, pluralism does not contradict the idea of a good society, for the latter would be one that would allow a wide scope for diversity and would draw upon resources from its pluralistic communities in discerning those things that are necessarily matters of the good of all."

In the conjoining of the public good with the private rights of diverse individuals, and of communitarianism with a cosmopolitan view of pluralism, Bellah and associates touch base with the central issue of our pluralistic constitutional republic as James Madison framed it in 1787 in The Federalist Paper Number 10: "To secure the public good and private rights [of individuals] against the danger of [an overbearing majority], and at the same time to preserve the spirit and form of popular government is then the great object to which our inquiries are directed." And so it is today. Our inquiries

as civic educators and citizens still must be centrally concerned with conjoining the sometimes contradictory factors of community and individuality, of majority and minority, of unity and diversity.

Can we do it? Can we citizens and civic educators of the United States, today and tomorrow, respond adequately to the ultimate challenge of our civic culture posed memorably by Schlesinger, Bellah and associates, and Madison?

In our responses we might, like Madison, tend to emphasize individualism, pluralism, and private rights, more than communitarianism or majoritarianism, in our quest for the common good of everyone in the civil society. Or we might be in agreement with Bellah and associates, who tend more toward the side of community, unity, and public responsibility through extensive citizen participation for the common good. The wisdom of our choices and the strength of our commitment to meeting our critical civic challenges will determine the destiny of our common civic culture and the national community that it has sustained.

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